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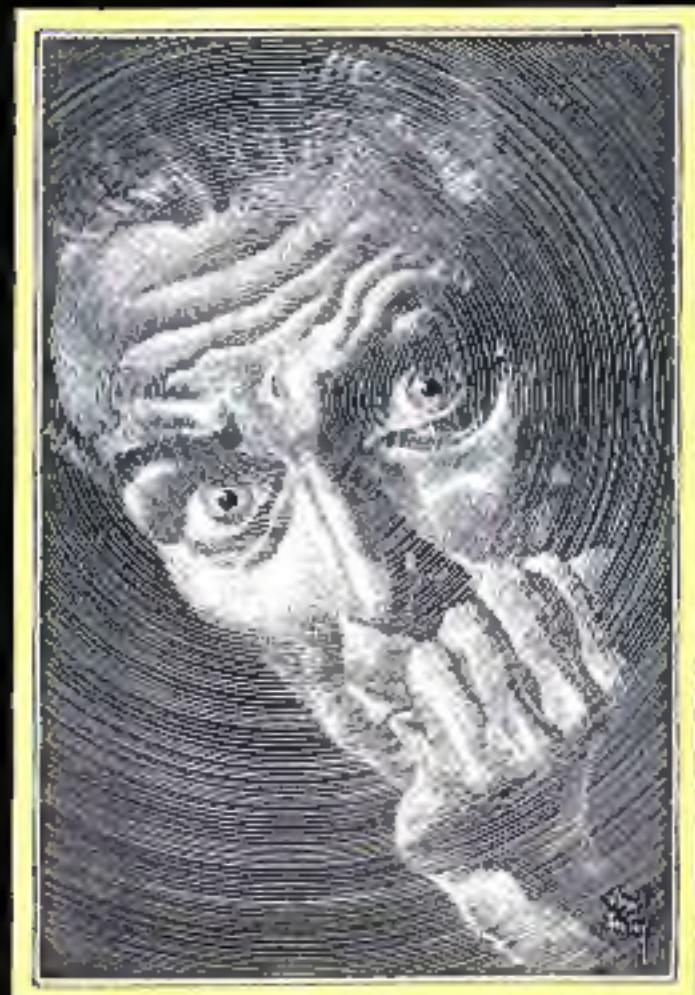
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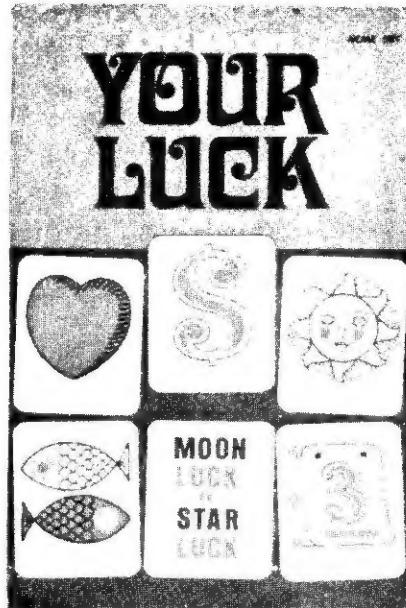
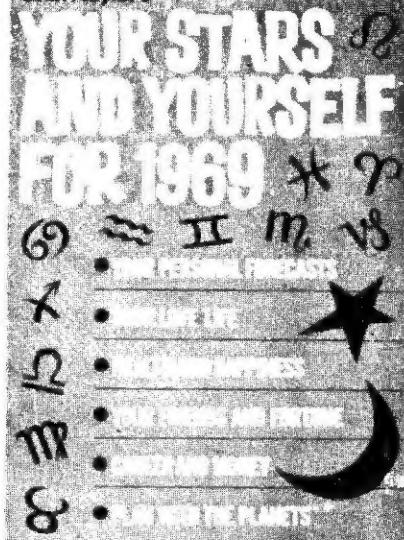
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STARTLING MYSTERY STORIES

Volume 2

CONTENTS FOR SPRING

Number 6

COVER	Virgil Finlay
THE EDITOR'S PAGE (On Edgar Allan Poe, Dupin, etc.)	4
THE WOMAN WITH THE VELVET COLLAR	Gaston Leroux
THE REAPER'S IMAGE	Stephen King
SIRRUSH (verse)	L. Sprague de Camp
SWORD FOR A SINNER (novelet)	Edward H. Koch
WEST ENGLAND'S LITTLE FOLK	58
TIGER	Bassett Morgan
INQUISITIONS (book review)	76
THE CITY OF THE BLIND (novelet)	Murray Leinster
THE CAULDRON (Your Letters & Our Comments)	112
THE RECKONING (Your Findings on the Fall Issue)	114
COMING NEXT ISSUE	116
INDEX TO VOLUME TWO	126
READERS' PREFERENCE PAGE (double-barreled)	129/130

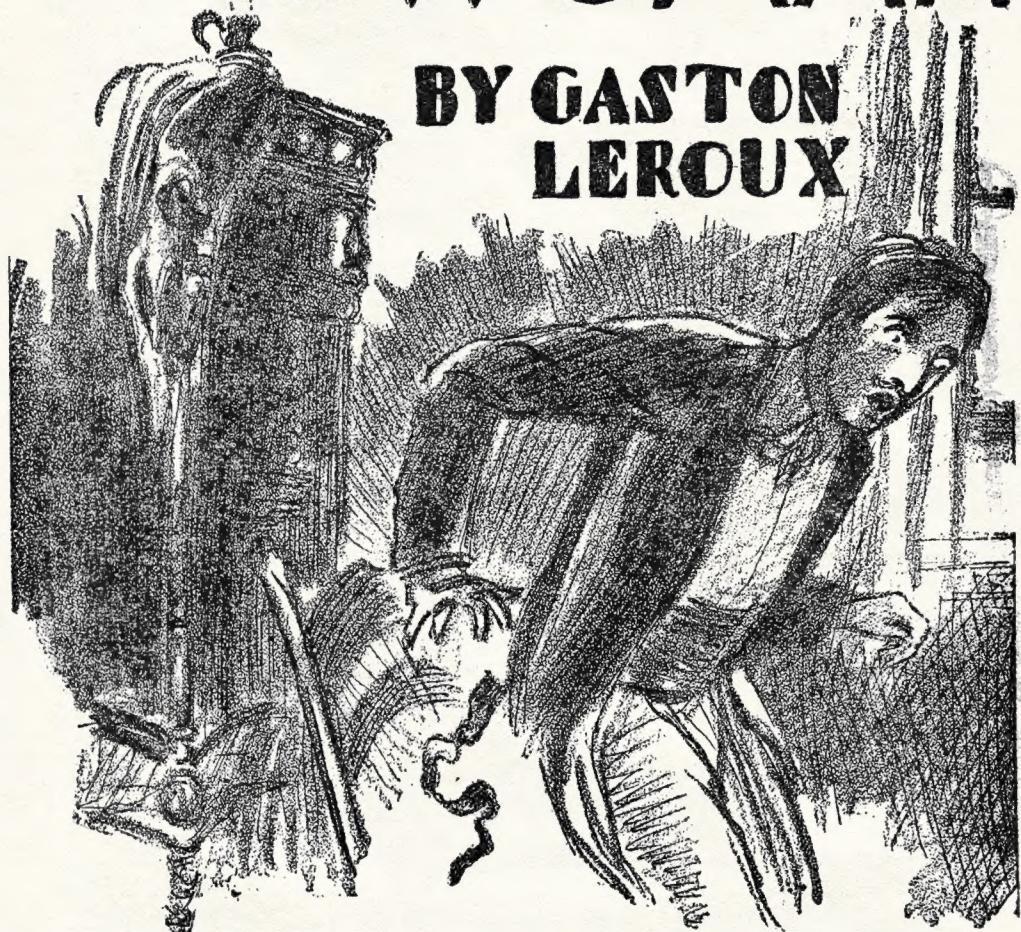
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The WOMAN

BY GASTON LEROUX



"YOU say that all the tales of Corsican vendettas are just the same old story over again," Gobert, a retired sea captain, remarked to his friend Captain Michel. "Well, you're wrong. I know one story that is so terrible that it makes all the others seem mere child's play. It even sent a chill up my hardened spine."

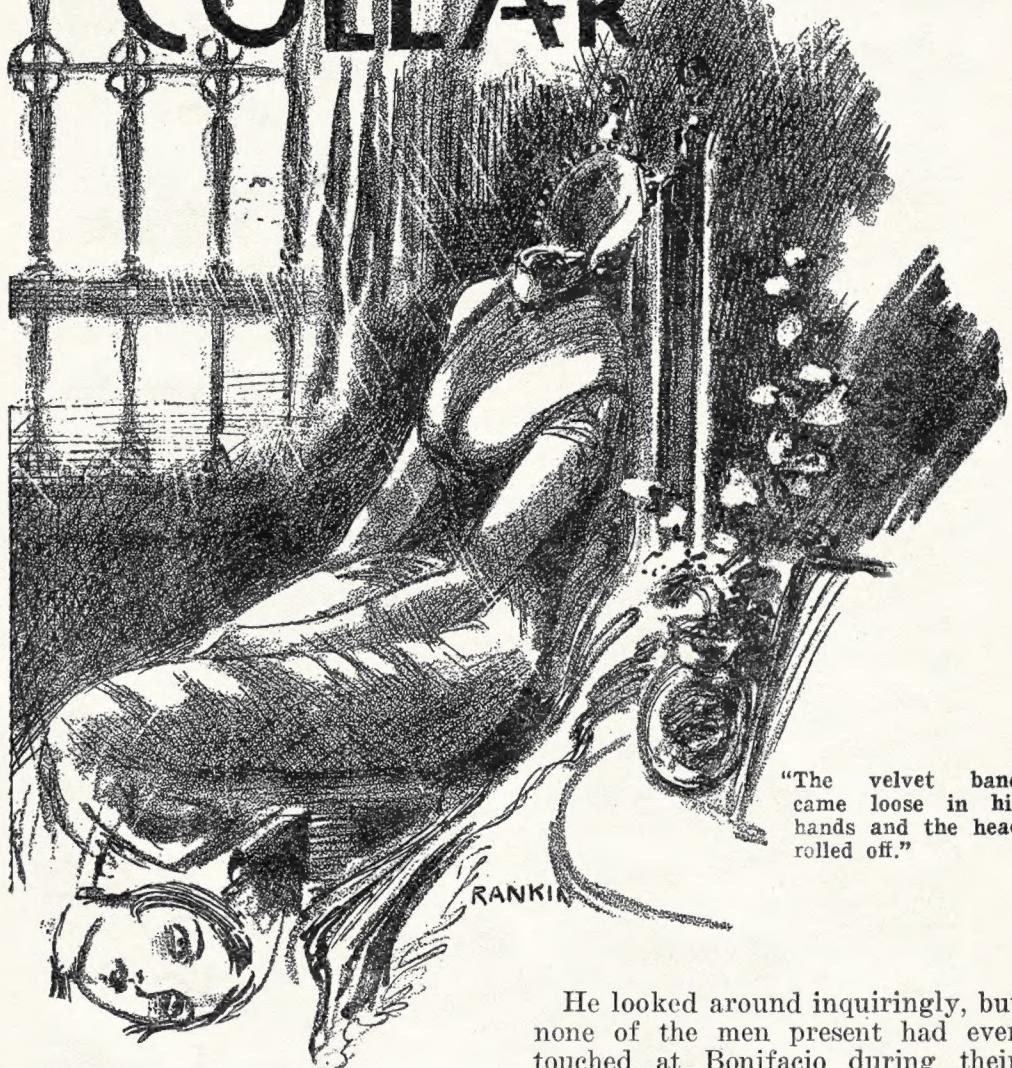
"Yes?" Michel was skeptical. His was the skepticism of a man who, believing to have known the most thrilling adventures, does not take stock in

other men's tales. "Yes," he went on, "another case of a couple of bullets in the back, I suppose. But go ahead, let's hear it. We haven't anything better to do."

With this last shot, he ordered another round of drinks, and the party of old sea-dogs, who gathered every evening in the Café of the Sea at Toulon to spin their yarns, settled themselves to listen.

"First of all," Gobert began, "my story hasn't anything to do with guns. And secondly, you've never heard of

with the VELVET COLLAR



"The velvet band came loose in his hands and the head rolled off."

RANKIN

a Corsican vendetta like mine unless, of course, you happened to have been at Bonifacio about thirty years ago, as I was. In that case you would have had your fill of the story because the whole town was agog with it."

He looked around inquiringly, but none of the men present had ever touched at Bonifacio during their many voyages.

"Well, I'm not surprised," Gobert went on. "It's not a port of importance, but it is one of the most picturesque towns in Corsica. You've all seen it, probably, on your way to the Orient. A lovely spot with its old

fortress, the turreted battlements, and time-stained walls. The fortress juts out over the crags like an eagle's nest

"Lay off the descriptions and give us the story," the others exclaimed impatiently.

"All right, here it is. I was in command of a small destroyer forming part of the squadron escorting the secretary of the navy on a tour of inspection in Corsica. At that time they were considering the fortification of several ports. In fact, they even thought for a while of turning Porto-Vecchio, which is as large as Brest, into a regular naval base.

"The secretary of the navy went first to Calvi and Bastia, from where we returned to Ajaccio to wait for him while he crossed the island by train, passing by Vizzavona, where he was met with great ceremony by a delegation of bandits who had left the wilds of the interior that very morning to present their respects to him.

"The famous Bella Coscia, himself, commanded the squad that fired the salute. The secretary of the navy was much impressed with his imposing bearing, his rifle whose carved stock had a nick in it for every man he had killed, and his famous knife—the dagger given to him by Edmond About with the request never to leave it in the wound!"

"There you are, the same old stories," Captain Michel interrupted peevishly. "Just a lot of old wives' tales."

"You're right, old chap; these are just stories, but if you'll hold your horses, you'll hear something more important.

"We left Ajaccio and arrived in Bonifacio at night. The larger ships continued to Porto-Vecchio, but I was among those detailed to escort the secretary ashore. It was a gala night, of course. A big dinner was followed by a grand reception at the town-hall.

"Bonifacio, situated as it was opposite Magdalena, wanted fortifications and its citizens had turned out in great style to make a good impression. They produced the best of everything they had—flowers, finery, and beautiful women, and you know how beautiful Corsican women can be! At dinner there were some striking beauties and I remarked about it enthusiastically to my neighbor, Pietro Santo, a charming fellow of a frank, good-natured appearance, who was then town clerk.

"Wait until you have seen the woman with the velvet collar," he said seriously in answer to my remark.

"Is she more beautiful than these?" I asked with a smile.

"Yes," he replied without smiling, "yes, she is more beautiful, but it is not the same kind of beauty"

"In the meantime our conversation drifted to the customs of the country. My head was still ringing with all the wild brigand stories I had just been hearing from my comrades, on their return from escorting the secretary to Vizzavona, and their account of the spectacular reception by Bella Coscia had seemed to me like a scene from a musical comedy. I thought it was rather polite on my part to doubt the dangerous character of these outlaws. After all, Corsica was as civilized as certain parts of France itself at that time.

"The custom of vendetta," Santo explained to me after I had spoken, "continues to be a part of the code of honor here in the same way that dueling is with you. Your revenge accomplished, you automatically find yourself an outlaw. But what can be done about it? It's too bad, of course, but we have to put up with existing facts. I myself am an easy-going man. I was brought up in an antique dealer's shop and I'm sorry to see how savage some of my compatriots still can be when their family honor, as they call it, is in danger."

"'You surprize me,' I exclaimed, pointing out to him the jolly, good-natured faces around the banquet table.

"He shook his head. 'Don't trust them,' he warned, and his face grew dark; 'a laugh changes very quickly to a diabolical grin on their lips. All these dark eyes are sparkling with frankness and merriment tonight. Tomorrow they may flash black with thoughts of hate and revenge. And all those slender, delicate hands clasping each other in good fellowship never cease toying with hidden arms.'

"'I thought those customs had died out in the cities and only existed in the little villages of the interior,' I said.

"'The first husband of the lady with the velvet collar was mayor of Bonifacio, sir.'

"I did not understand the allusion and was on the verge of asking for an explanation of this somewhat enigmatical remark when I was stopped by a call for silence. The speeches were about to begin. At their conclusion we withdrew to the drawing-room, and it was there that I first saw the woman with the velvet collar. Nor did I need Pietro Santo to point her out to me. There was no mistaking that strange funereal beauty and the velvet ribbon, which circled the base of her neck making a wide, black strip against the whiteness of her skin. This velvet collar was worn very low at the rise of the shoulders and emphasized her long and slender neck. She carried her head very proudly, always holding it in a straight, rigid position. Her face was classic in its beauty but so pale that one would have believed it chiseled in marble had it not been for two flashing eyes of strange brilliancy.

"As she passed through the room they all bowed to her with lowered eyes and I caught a general atmosphere of fear and instinctive recoil

which roused my curiosity to full pitch. Her beautiful body was draped in black velvet and as she came forward, slipping in and out of the crowd, with her proud head and tragically pale face, I had the impression of seeing the dignified ghost of some dead and martyred queen. When she had gone, I turned to my new friend and voiced my feelings about this uncanny woman.

"There is nothing strange about that,' he answered seriously. '*She was guillotined!*'

"I looked at him in astonishment. 'What do you mean?' I stammered.

"But he could not answer me immediately. The 'woman with the velvet band', having greeted the secretary of the navy, came down the room toward us, stopped and held out her hand to my friend.

"'Good evening, Pietro Santo,' she said, and I noticed that her head never moved from its rigid position.

"He mumbled something and bowed, and she went on. All the eyes in the room were focused on her and a deep silence had fallen. I noticed then that she was escorted by a handsome, well-built fellow of about thirty. His face had the fine profile often found on old Greek coins. These delicate features are frequently seen among the Corsicans and sometimes give them a family resemblance with the great emperor.

"'He's her second husband,' Pietro Santo whispered, noticing my gaze.

"The couple disappeared at this moment, and I was conscious of a sigh of relief rising throughout the room, while an old man in a corner crossed himself, muttering a prayer.

"They never stay very long,' Pietro Santo explained, 'because they're not on very good terms with the present mayor, Ascoli. Angeluccia—that is her name—has always been proud and ambitious and she wanted her second husband, Giuseppe Gir-

genti, to be mayor like her first one. But they were defeated at the last elections and I think they always will be because of the guillotine affair."

"I started and caught my friend by the arm. He smiled.

"'Oh,' he exclaimed, 'you'd like to know the story.... I hear the mayor telling it to the secretary this minute; but he doesn't know it as well as I do. You see, Captain, I was a member of the household and *I saw everything even to the bottom of the basket!*'"

"'Have a cigar, Santo?' I offered. 'You've never smoked any as good as these.'

"Pietro Santo took a cigar and I fumed with impatience while he chatted with the man who had interrupted us. Afterward I suggested he come aboard my ship, for I was determined to know the rest of the story before I left Bonifacio.

"'AND so,' I began with a laugh, 'as soon as we were installed in my cabin, 'you say that woman was guillotined?'

"'You do wrong to laugh, sir,' he replied, extremely serious. 'She was guillotined and it happened before the eyes of almost all the people you saw this evening. If you noticed, they all crossed themselves when she came into the room.'

"I stared at him in open-eyed amazement and he went on simply: '*That's why she always wears that velvet band: to hide the scar!*'"

"'Mr. Santo, you're making fun of me. I'm going to call on Angeluccia and ask her to take off the band before my eyes. I should like to see that scar.'

"The man shook his head. 'She wouldn't take it off, sir. *We all know that if she did her head would fall off!*'"

"And so saying, he too made the sign of the cross. I studied him by

the light of the little swinging lamp. With his curly hair and slight figure, he looked like a timid angel frightened at the sight of the devil. I could not help smiling.

"'And yet Antonio Macci, Angeluccia's first husband, was the best of men,' he sighed. 'Who would ever suspect such a thing of him? I loved him, sir. He had been very good to me. He was an antique dealer and had brought me up in his shop. He was famous in his line all through Corsica and known to many tourists to whom he sold souvenirs of Napoleon and the imperial family. He manufactured these curios, because the rage for them was such that the authentic pieces had long been sold and there were no more to be had. He made a fortune in this business, and the tourists were quite happy with their purchases, which they were firmly convinced were authentic. Antonio, however, never lost an opportunity to buy any revolutionary articles when the occasion offered. He was able to sell them at a good price to the English and Americans, who never left the island without first paying him a little visit.'

"From time to time he made short trips to France to renew our stock, and I went with him the last time he went to Toulon. He had read in the papers that there were some very interesting pieces to be sold at auction and he was anxious to acquire them for his shop.

"We made a number of purchases that day. We bought a Bastille relief for 425 francs, General Moreau's bed for 215 francs, Mirabeau's death mask for 1,000 francs, a bezel ring with some locks of Louis XVI's hair for 1,200 francs, and last the famous guillotine which, it seems, Samson, the famous executioner, himself had used. This cost us 921 francs. And we returned home very well pleased with ourselves and our purchases.

"We found Angeluccia and her cousin Giuseppe waiting for us on the dock. The deputy mayor and a delegation from the town council were also waiting for us because Antonio, through his successful business, had become one of the most important men in the town and had been elected mayor. He was about forty years old at the time and his wife twenty, but this great difference in age did not keep Angeluccia from loving her husband ardently. Giuseppe, however, who was about her age, obviously adored his cousin. Anyone could see it merely by the manner in which he looked at her. But be that as it may, I must add that I for my part had never seen anything in the behavior of the two to justify the slightest suspicion in the husband. Angeluccia, herself, was too honest and too upright in her actions to give poor Giuseppe any chance to forget her marital duties. And I never believed that he would have had the daring to attempt such an enterprise. He loved Angeluccia. That was all. And my master knew it as well as the rest of us. Perfectly sure of his wife, he used to joke with her sometimes about it.

"Angeluccia, who was kind by nature, asked him to spare her poor cousin and not make too much fun of him because Antonio would never find his equal in imitating and redoing furniture of the Empire and Louis XVI. Giuseppe, in fact, was a real artist. Besides, he knew all of Antonio's business secrets, which was probably why the dealer tolerated a workman who looked at his wife with such eloquent eyes.

"Giuseppe's forlorn love made him rather melancholy; but Angeluccia was always gay. She had not yet become the funereal beauty you saw today. She laughed often and was affectionate and happy with her husband like any good little wife who has nothing on her conscience.

"Our return was well celebrated. Angeluccia had prepared an excellent luncheon and had invited a few friends to share it with us. Everyone was anxious to hear of the new and sensational purchases and everyone wanted to see them.

"Does the guillotine still work?" one of the guests asked.

"Would you like to try it?" the master of the house answered with a laugh.

"During the meal, Antonio, next to whom I was seated, accidentally dropped his napkin and bent over to pick it up. But I had already seen it slide to the floor and my head was under the table at the same time that his was. I straightened up and returned him his napkin. Then with a hurried excuse I left the room, bewildered.

"I stumbled into the shop and sank into a chair. My discovery had momentarily stunned me, but as my wits returned to me my first question was: had Antonio seen? No, my sudden movement and the position of my head under the table must have made that impossible. Besides, the very calmness with which he had straightened up and received the napkin from me and the quiet way in which he had resumed conversation should have reassured me.

"I RETURNED to the dining-room, where the meal was finishing gayly. The deputy mayor, who is the mayor today, was insisting on being shown the guillotine immediately. Antonio, however, answered that he must wait until the instrument of death had been put in working order. "I know my Americans," he added with a laugh; "they won't buy it unless it works perfectly!"

"Shortly afterward, the guests took leave of their hosts, and during the rest of the day I could not keep my eyes off Angeluccia, who kissed

her husband a hundred times if she kissed him once during the afternoon. It made me shiver to watch her. I did not imagine that such deceit was possible in so young and apparently frank a person.

"'You see, Captain, when I bent under the table at luncheon I had seen Angeluccia's little foot tightly and amorously pressed between Giuseppe's! Her very movement in releasing her foot had proved the crime to me.

"'As the days passed, life at the shop went on as usual. A few foreign customers came for the famous guillotine, but the master answered that there were still some necessary repairs and that he would not sell it until it was in perfect working condition. In fact, we were working on it secretly in the basement and had taken it down and put it together several times. It was badly worm-eaten and out of joint and we were trying to balance it properly so that the knife would run smoothly in its grooves. This work revolted me, but it seemed on the contrary to please Antonio.

"'Angeluccia's birthday and the Pentecost fell on the same date, and as it was customary for the mayor to give a party of some sort on the day of Pentecost, Antonio announced that he had decided to give a costume ball. This would be an excellent opportunity to show his guillotine. No one had seen it yet and it was to be the crowning event of the evening.

"'Bonifacio is very fond of this sort of amusement, historical reconstructions and pageants, and when Angeluccia heard the plan she flung herself on her husband's neck like a happy child. She, herself, suggested that she go as Marie Antoinette.

"'We'll make it very realistic and guillotine you at the end of the party," Antonio said with a laugh.

"'Why not?" Angeluccia answered. "It would be fun."

"'WHEN the town knew what sort of a party the mayor was planning, everyone wanted to go, and the next fifteen days before Pentecost were filled with preparations. The shop was full from morning to night with people running in and out, asking advice and studying old prints. Antonio was to represent Fouquier-Tinville, the terrible public accuser. Giuseppe was to be Samson, the executioner, and I was to fill the humble rôle of his aid.

"'The great day arrived. Early in the morning we emptied the shop of all the odds and ends with which it was filled and put up the guillotine. Giuseppe had made a knife of cardboard covered with silver paper, so that Angeluccia's desire to play the guillotine scene to the end could be carried out, and we tried the machine several times to make sure it worked.

"'We danced all afternoon and at night there was a big ball at the town-hall. Everyone drank toast after toast enthusiastically to the mayor and his beautiful wife. Angeluccia was dressed in the costume worn by Marie Antoinette during her imprisonment, and this simple dress, well in keeping with the feelings of a poor woman destined to so tragic an end, suited her marvelously. I shall never forget the sight of Angeluccia's beautiful white neck rising proudly from the delicately crossed kerchief, and Giuseppe devoured her with his eyes. Catching the too apparent flame of desire in his look I could not help glancing from time to time at Antonio, who seemed almost wildly gay.

"'At the end of the dinner, it was he who gave the signal for the start of the horrible play. In a well-prepared speech, he informed the guests that he and some friends of his had planned a little surprize, which consisted in presenting to them the most tragic hours of the revolution; Bonifacio having the great fortune of possessing a guillotine, they were going to make

use of it to decapitate Marie Antoinette.

"At these words the people laughed and cheered, making a merry ovation to Angeluccia, who rose from her seat and declared that she would know how to die courageously as be-fitted a queen of France.

"A roll of drums suddenly beat in the streets, and we ran to the windows. A miserable cart drawn by a dilapidated horse stood there surrounded by guards and officers of the guillotine all wearing the bonnet of the revolution. A group of horrible knitting-women danced and sang in the streets, calling loudly for the death of the Austrian, dethroned queen of France. One might very easily have imagined himself back in the days of 1793!

"We had all taken part in this game without seeing any harm in it, and it wasn't until Angeluccia had stepped into the cart with her hands tied behind her back, and the procession had started to the sinister beat of the funeral drums, that more than one felt a shiver steal up his spine and realized that such a masquerade might well touch upon sacrilege.

"The whole scene was horribly effective. Night had fallen, and the flickering light of the torches gave a death-like beauty to Angeluccia's face. And she played her part well. Holding herself proudly erect, she seemed to be braving the populace with her cold stare, and her face with its changeless severity of expression might well have been carved in stone.

"WE REACHED Antonio's house, and there the gay laughs broke out anew. Antonio was already in the shop, where he had seated a chosen group of people who were to watch the mock execution. The mob was thickly packed in, and everyone was in a state of extreme excitement at finally seeing the famous guillotine at such close range. My

master asked for silence and began by making a little speech on the good points of his instrument of death. He mentioned all the noble necks which, he claimed, had rested on the head-boards, and he ended by exhibiting the real knife which he had bought at the same time.

"I had the paper knife up there made so that you could see just how the thing worked," he explained; then, turning to Giuseppe, "Are you ready, Samson?"

"Samson replied that he was ready.

"Bring forth the Austrian," Antonio ordered in a deep voice.

"Giuseppe and I placed Marie Antoinette-Angeluccia on the plank, and Antonio himself lowered the board that held her head in position.

"The laughter in the room suddenly ceased and an uneasy feeling swept over the crowd. The sight of the lovely body stretched out on the plank brought to the minds of even the hardened men present the memory of all the unfortunates who had really lain there to die. The joke had been carried too far. The merriment was revived for the moment, however, by the sight of Angeluccia's amused face as she looked here and there at the guests while her husband finished his lecture on the machine, showing the basket which received the body and that into which the head fell.

"But suddenly, as we watched Angeluccia an awful change came over her face. Wild terror was written there. Her eyes had widened horribly and her mouth half opened as though to let out a cry which stuck in her throat.

"Giuseppe was at the back and had seen nothing of this; but I, who was at the side, was struck with a nameless fear as the others had been. We were looking at the sight of one who really knew she was going to be decapitated. The laughter had died out and some of the people even

shrank back as though struck by an invincible terror.

"As for me, I came closer, for I had suddenly noticed that Angeluccia's horror-stricken eyes were staring at something in the bottom of the basket which was to receive the head. I looked into this basket, which Antonio had opened only a moment before, and I too read what Angeluccia had read—I too read the little placard fastened to the bottom:

Pray to the Virgin Mary, Angeluccia, wife of Antonio, mistress of Giuseppe, for you are about to die!

"I uttered a hollow cry and turned like a madman to stop Giuseppe, who, at a motion from Antonio, had seized the rope. Alas! I was too late. The knife fell, and what followed was horrible, too horrible for words. The unfortunate woman let out a scream, a scream which ended in an abrupt gurgle—a scream which will echo in my ears to my dying day—and then her blood spouted out over the audience, which let out sickening cries and made a desperate fight for the door. I fainted."

"Here Pietro Santo stopped and grew so pale at the memory of the awful scene that I feared he was going to be ill again. I restored some of his strength with a glass of old grappa.

"But in spite of all that," I said to him, "Angeluccia was not killed. I saw her myself and she certainly was alive."

"He sighed and lifted his head.

"Are you sure she really is alive?" he asked. "There isn't a soul in Bonifacio who passes her in the street without crossing himself. Seeing her never look to the right nor to the left, always holding her head rigid, they firmly believe that her head is held to her neck by some supernatural miracle. That is how the legend of the velvet collar grew. Besides, she looks like a ghost, and when she shakes

hands with me the touch of her icy skin makes me tremble.

"Yes, I know it's childish, but the whole affair was such a strange one that you must excuse the fantastic tales which our peasant folk have created. The truth of the matter is, I suppose, that Antonio planned his blow badly, that the machine was too old and did not work properly, and that Angeluccia's head was pushed too far through the opening, in such a way that the knife struck her at the rise of the shoulders. This is not the first time that such an accident has occurred with the guillotine. We have heard of cases where it took five tries to cut the head off. Giuseppe was the only one present when the doctor, whom he himself had fetched, saw her, and he says the wound was quite large. Everybody ran away at the time, and Antonio himself disappeared. You can see how all this helped form the legend that grew up overnight. Even those who were present at the time claim that they saw Angeluccia's head actually drop into the basket!"

"Naturally, when Angeluccia reappeared some weeks later with her velvet ribbon, imaginations ran riot. And even when I look at her, there are times when I am hypnotized by her neck and wouldn't dare *under any circumstances untie her velvet band!*"

"And what happened to Antonio?"

"He is dead, or at least so they say. At any rate, his decease has been legally published since Giuseppe and Angeluccia are married. They found his body half eaten by crabs on the beach near the grottoes. The corpse was completely disfigured, but they found papers on it and the clothes were his. He probably ran away, believing Angeluccia dead, and threw himself over the cliff. He had prepared his revenge well, silently and cunningly as they do here, but I am still amazed at the skill with which he hid his feelings from the day that he

first got an inkling of the truth of the relations between Angeluccia and her cousin.

"The police have the duplicate knife that he made so that it would look like Giuseppe's. It is in Ajaccio."

"Your story isn't bad," Captain Michel conceded generously to Gobert. "It has an element of horror in it."

"It's not finished yet," Gobert explained, asking for another few minutes of silence. "Let me go on and you will see that it really is horrible. I didn't know the end myself until some time later on a second voyage to Bonifacio, and it was good old Pietro Santo who related the concluding details to me.

"Imagine my extreme amazement when on asking him news of the woman with the velvet collar, he answered me in perfect seriousness: 'Captain, the legend was right after all. *Angeluccia died on the day that the velvet collar was touched!*'"

"What!" I cried. "But who undid the collar?"

"I did. And her head fell off!"

"While I stared at Pietro Santo, wondering if he had lost his mind, he explained to me that after I had left Bonifacio a doubt had spread through the town as to the truth of Antonio's supposed death. It seemed that Ascoli, the mayor, was responsible for this and claimed to know what he was talking about. He was convinced that he had met Antonio one day when he was out hunting. The man had been almost naked, living like a wild beast, and when Ascoli tried to speak to him he ran away.

"It was during this time that the elections for mayor came up again and Giuseppe was Ascoli's rival for the post. During the entire campaign, Ascoli declared that Giuseppe was the accomplice of a bigamous woman and therefore unworthy of the

position. His rage knew no bounds when he was defeated and he resolved to hunt Antonio out. It took him several months to do so, but he finally accomplished his purpose. Antonio, who for ten years had never spoken to a soul, learned that his wife was not dead as he had supposed but was living happily with Giuseppe in the very house in which he had been mayor and had believed himself loved by her.

"What happened then," Pietro Santo went on in a hollow voice, "is beyond conception, and would make even the demons in hell shrink in horror. Good Lord, if I live to be a thousand. . . . But to cut it short, sir, the story can be told in a few words.

"One evening, a soft, clear evening like this, I was returning from an expedition to the grottoes, where I had escorted some friends, and was seated in the little boat taking us back to port when, in passing the cliffs, I heard a chant that made my blood run cold. It was the song which is always sung here by those who have some mortal affront to avenge. I lifted my head. A man stood like a statue on the edge of the rocks which served as a sort of pedestal to him. Although he was dressed in rags, he shouldered his gun proudly, and suddenly, as the last rays of the sun caught his face and brought it into full relief, I uttered one cry: 'Antonio!'

"It was he! It was he! Oh, I was sure it was he! His fatal song and exalted air convinced me that he had not returned to these parts, after playing dead for ten years, without nursing some abominable purpose.

"Fortunately, I could reach town quicker by boat than he could on foot. There would be time to warn Giuseppe and Angeluccia. I threw myself on the oars and reached the dock in a few minutes. The first person I met was Giuseppe himself, who was on his way home from the town-hall. I

(Continued on page 575)

The Woman With the Velvet Collar

(Continued from page 449)

thanked heaven I had arrived in time and called out to him to hurry, that a terrible misfortune was about to fall, that I had seen Antonio—Antonio himself—alive, and that he was on his way to town.

"While questioning me he fell into step beside me and we both ran for his house at full speed and arrived there panting.

"Angeluccia! Angeluccia!" we called, flinging open the door.

"No answer.

"God help us if she's gone for a walk," Giuseppe groaned desperately.

"We went upstairs, still calling her, and he went into one room while I entered another. And it was there that I found her. She was seated by the window in a large armchair, her head resting against the cushion, and she seemed to be sleeping. As she was always extremely pale, the pallor of her beautiful face did not surprize me although it might have struck another.

"Come," I cried to Giuseppe; "she is here."

"In the meantime I had come closer, surprized that she did not awake. I touched her . . . I touched the velvet band, which came loose in my hands, and her head rolled off!

"I fled with my heart pounding wildly from shock and fright, but on my way I slipped and fell in a horrible pool of blood, which I had not noticed on entering because of the shadows which darkened the room. I picked myself up with a yell and left the house madly. People ran from me in the streets as one runs from a wild beast.

"During the next few days I came near to going insane. Fortunately I completely recovered my senses, well enough, in fact, to be the present

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mayor of Bonifacio. As you probably understand by now, sir, I had seen Antonio *as he was returning from the deed!* It was easy enough to figure the whole thing out then. He had entered the house, found Angeluccia alone, and killed her with a stab in the heart. Then, his mind haunted by what Ascoli had told him, he completed the work which he had commenced so clumsily ten years before. More certain of his Corsican dagger than of the mock-historical instrument which had failed him before, he had decapitated her and without shrinking from the atrocity of the deed had replaced her head on her shoulders and had tied it in position with the velvet ribbon!

"And now," concluded Pietro Santo, "if you want news of Giuseppe you will have to go into the wilds for it. Two days after the murder, he disappeared into the mountains with a gun over his shoulder and Angeluccia's head, which he had embalmed himself, in a sack around his waist. Giuseppe, Ascoli and Antonio have never been seen since, but they have probably met in the approved fashion and killed each other in some hidden corner of the woods.

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The Reaper's Image

by Stephen King

"We moved it last year, and quite an operation it was, too," Mr. Carlin said as they mounted the stairs. "Had to move it by hand, of course. No other way. We insured it against accident with Lloyd's before we even took it out of the case in the drawing room. Only firm that would insure for the sum we had in mind."

Spangler said nothing. The man was a fool. Johnson Spangler had learned a long time ago that the only way to talk to a fool was to ignore him.

"Insured it for a quarter of a million dollars," Mr. Carlin resumed when they reached the second-floor landing. His mouth quirked in a half-bitter, half-humorous line. "And a pretty penny it cost, too." He was a little man, not quite fat, with rimless glasses and a tanned baldhead that shone like a varnished volleyball. A suit of armor, guarding the mahogany shadows of the second-floor corridor, stared at them impassively.

It was a long corridor, and Spangler eyed the walls and hangings with a cool professional eye. Samuel Claggert had bought in copious quantities, but he had not bought well. Like so many of the self-made industry emperors of the late 1800's, he had been little more than a pawnshop rooter masquerading in collector's clothing, a connoisseur of canvas monstrosities, trashy novels and poetry collections in expensive cowhide bindings, and atrocious pieces of sculpture, all of which he considered Art.

Up here the walls were hung -- festooned was perhaps a better word -- with imitation Moroccan drapes, numberless (and, no doubt, anonymous) madonnas holding numberless haloed babes while numberless angels flitted hither and thither in the background, grotesque scrolled candelabra, and one monstrous and obscenely ornate chandelier surmounted by a salaciously grinning nymphet.

Of course the old pirate had come up with a few interesting items, the law of averages demanded it. And if the Samuel Claggert Memorial Private Museum (Guided Tours on the Hour -- Admission \$1.00 Adults, \$.50 Children -- nauseating) was 98 percent blatant junk, there was always that other two percent, things like the Coombs long rifle over the hearth in the kitchen, the strange little *camera obscure* in the parlor, and of course the --

"The Delver looking-glass was removed from downstairs after a rather unfortunate incident," Mr. Carlin said abruptly, motivated apparently by a ghastly glaring portrait of no one in particular at the base of the next staircase. "There had been others -- harsh words, wild statements -- but this was an attempt to actually *destroy* the mirror. The woman, a Miss Sandra Bates, came in with a rock in her pocket. Fortunately her aim was bad and she only cracked a corner of the case. The mirror was unharmed. The Bates girl had a brother --"

"No need to give me the dollar tour," Spangler said quietly. "I'm conversant with the history of the Delver glass."

"Fascinating, isn't it?" Carlin cast him an odd, oblique look. "There was that English duchess in 1709... and the Pennsylvania rug merchant in 1746... not to mention --"

"I'm conversant with the history," Spangler repeated quietly "It's the workmanship I'm interested in. And then, of course, there's the question of authenticity -- "

"Authenticity!" Mr Carlin chuckled, a dry sound, as if bones had stirred in a cupboard below the stairs "It's been examined by experts, Mr Spangler" "So was the Lemlier Stradivarius." "So true," Mr Carlin said with a sigh "But no Stradivarius ever had quite the. the unsettling effect of the Delver glass."

"Yes, quite," Spangler said in his softly contemptuous voice He understood now that there would be no stopping Carlin, he had a mind, which was perfectly in tune with the age. "Quite."

They climbed the third and fourth flights in silence As they drew closer to the roof of the rambling structure, it became oppressively hot in the dark upper galleries. With the heat came a creeping stench that Spangler knew well, for he had spent all his adult life working in it -- a smell of long-dead flies in shadowy corners, of wet rot and creeping wood lice behind the plaster. The smell of age It was a smell common only to museums and mausoleums He imagined much the same smell might arise from the grave of a virginal young girl, forty years dead.

Up here the relics were piled helter-skelter in true junk-shop profusion, Mr Carlin led Spangler through a maze of statuary, frame-splintered portraits, pompous gold-plated birdcages, the dismembered skeleton of an ancient tandem bicycle He led him to the far wall where a stepladder had been set up beneath a trapdoor in the ceiling A dusty padlock hung from the trap.

Off to the left, an imitation Adonis stared at them pitilessly with blank pupilless eyes One arm was outstretched, and a yellow sign hung on the wrist which- read: ABSOLUTELY NO

ADMITTANCE

Mr. Carlin produced a key ring from his jacket pocket, selected a key, and mounted the stepladder. He paused on the third rung, his bald head gleaming faintly in the shadows "I don't like that mirror," he said "I never did. I'm afraid to look into it. I'm afraid I might look into it one day and see... what the rest of them saw."

"They saw nothing but themselves," Spangler said.

Mr. Carlin began to speak, stopped, shook his head, and fumbled above him, craning his neck to fit the key properly into the lock "Should be replaced," he muttered. "It's -- damn!" The lock sprung suddenly and swung out of the hasp. Mr Carlin made a fumbling grab for it and almost fell off the ladder Spangler caught it deftly and looked up at him He was clinging shakily to the top of the stepladder, face white in the brown semidarkness

"You *are* nervous about it, aren't you?" Spangler said in a mildly wondering tone

Mr. Carlin said nothing. He seemed paralyzed.

"Come down," Spangler said. "Please. Before you fall."

Carlin descended the ladder slowly, clinging to each rung like a man tottering over a bottomless chasm When his feet touched the floor he began to babble, as if the floor contained some current that had turned him on, like an electric light

"A quarter of a million," he said. "A quarter of a million dollars' worth of insurance to take that . *thing* from down there to up here. That goddam *thing*. They had to rig a special block and tackle to get it into the gable storeroom up there. And I was hoping -- almost praying -- that someone's fingers would be slippery. that the rope would be the wrong test . that the thing would fall and be shattered into a million pieces -- "

"Facts," Spangler said. "Facts, Carlin. Not cheap paperback novels, not cheap tabloid stories or equally cheap horror movies. *Facts*. Number one John Delver was an English craftsman of Norman descent who made mirrors in what we call the Elizabethan period of England's history. He lived and died uneventfully. No pentacles scrawled on the floor for the housekeeper to rub out, no sulfur-smelling documents with a splotch of blood on the dotted line. Number two His mirrors have become collector's items due principally to fine craftsmanship and to the fact that a form of crystal was used that has a mildly magnifying and distorting effect upon the eye of the beholder -- a rather distinctive trademark. Number three: Only five Delves remain in existence to our present knowledge -- two of them in America. They are priceless. Number four This Delver and one other that was destroyed in the London Blitz have gained a rather spurious reputation due largely to falsehood, exaggeration, and coincidence -- "

"Fact number five," Mr. Carlin said. "You're a supercilious bastard, aren't you?"

Spangler looked with mild detestation at the blind-eyed Adonis.

"I was guiding the tour that Sandra Bates's brother was a part of when he got his look into your precious Delver mirror, Spangler. He was perhaps sixteen, part of a high-school group I was going through the history of the glass and had just got to the part *you* would appreciate -- extolling the flawless craftsmanship, the perfection of the glass itself -- when the boy raised his hand. 'But what about that black splotch in the upper left-hand corner?' he asked. 'That looks like a mistake!'

"And one of his friends asked him what he meant, so the Bates boy started to tell him, then stopped. He looked at the mirror very closely, pushing right up to the red velvet guard-rope around the case -- *then he looked behind him as if what he had seen had been the reflection of someone -- of someone in black -- standing at his shoulder*. 'It looked like a man,' he said. 'But I couldn't see the face. It's gone now.' And that was all."

"Go on," Spangler said. "You're itching to tell me it was the Reaper -- I believe that is the common explanation, isn't it? That occasional chosen people see the Reaper's image in the glass? Get it out of your system, man. The *National Enquirer* would love it! Tell me about the horrific consequences and defy me to explain it. Was he later hit by a car? Did he jump out of a window? What?"

Mr. Carlin chuckled a forlorn little chuckle. "You should know better, Spangler. Haven't you told me twice that you are. ah conversant with the history of the Delver glass. There *were* no horrific consequences. There never have been. That's why the Delver glass isn't Sunday-supplementized like the Koh-i-noor Diamond or the curse on King Tut's tomb. It's mundane compared to those. You think I'm a fool, don't you?"

"Yes," Spangler said. "Can we go up now?"

"Certainly," Mr. Carlin said passionately. He climbed the ladder and pushed the trapdoor. There was a clickety-clackety-bump as it was drawn up into the shadows by a counterweight, and then Mr. Carlin disappeared into the shadows. Spangler followed. The blind Adonis stared

unknowingly after them

The gable room was explosively hot, lit only by one cobwebby, many-angled window that filtered the hard outside light into a dirty milky glow. The looking-glass was propped at an angle to the light, catching most of it and reflecting a pearly patch onto the far wall. It had been bolted securely into a wooden frame. Mr. Carlin was not looking at it. Quite studiously not looking at it.

"You haven't even put a dustcloth over it," Spangler said, visibly angered for the first time

"I think of it as an eye," Mr. Carlin said. His voice was still drained, perfectly empty. "If it's left open, always open, perhaps it will go blind."

Spangler paid no attention. He took off his jacket, folded the buttons carefully in, and with infinite gentleness he wiped the dust from the convex surface of the glass itself. Then he stood back and looked at it.

It was genuine. There was no doubt about it, never had been, really. It was a perfect example of Delver's particular genius. The cluttered room behind him, his own reflection, Carlin's half-turned figure -- they were all clear, sharp, almost three-dimensional. The faint magnifying effect of the glass gave everything a slightly curved effect that added an almost fourth-dimensional distortion. It was --

His thought broke off, and he felt another wave of anger

"Carlin."

Carlin said nothing.

"Carlin, you damned fool, I thought you said that girl didn't harm the mirror!"

No answer

Spangler stared at him icily in the glass. "There is a piece of friction tape in the upper left-hand corner. Did she crack it? For God's sake, man, speak up!"

"You're seeing the Reaper," Carlin said. His voice was deadly and without passion. "There's no friction tape on the mirror. Put your hand over it... dear God."

Spangler wrapped the upper sleeve of his coat carefully around his hand, reached out, and pressed it gently against the mirror. "You see? Nothing supernatural. It's gone. My hand covers it."

"Covers it? Can you feel the tape? Why don't you pull it off?"

Spangler took his hand away carefully and looked into the glass. Everything in it seemed a little more distorted; the room's odd angles seemed to yaw crazily as if on the verge of sliding off into some unseen eternity. There was no dark spot in the mirror. It was flawless. He felt a sudden unhealthy dread rise in him and despised himself for feeling it.

"It looked like him, didn't it?" Mr. Carlin asked. His face was very pale, and he was looking directly at the floor. A muscle twitched spasmodically in his neck. "Admit it, Spangler

It looked like a hooded figure standing behind you, didn't it?"

"It looked like friction tape masking a short crack," Spangler said very firmly. "Nothing more, nothing less -- "

"The Bates boy was very husky," Carlin said rapidly. His words seemed to drop into the hot, still atmosphere like stones into dark water. "Like a football player. He was wearing a letter sweater and dark green chinos. We were halfway to the upper-half exhibits when -- "

"The heat is making me feel ill," Spangler said a little unsteadily. He had taken out a handkerchief and was wiping his neck. His eyes searched the convex surface of the mirror in small, jerky movements.

"When he said he wanted a drink of water... a drink of water, for God's sake!"

Carlin turned and stared wildly at Spangler. "How was I to know? How was I to know?"

"Is there a lavatory? I think I'm going to -"

"His sweater... I just caught a glimpse of his sweater going down the stairs... then..."

" -- be sick."

Carlin shook his head, as if to clear it, and looked at the floor again. "Of course. Third door on your left, second floor, as you go toward the stairs." He looked up appealingly. "How was I to *know!*"

But Spangler had already stepped down onto the ladder. It rocked under his weight and for a moment Carlin thought -- hoped -- that he would fall. He didn't. Through the open square in the floor Carlin watched him descend, holding his mouth lightly with one hand.

"Spangler -- ?"

But he was gone.

Carlin listened to his footfalls fade to echoes, then die away. When they were gone, he shivered violently. He tried to move his own feet to the trapdoor, but they were frozen. Just that last, hurried glimpse of the boy's sweater... God!...

It was as if huge invisible hands were pulling his head, forcing it up. Not wanting to look, Carlin stared into the glimmering depths of the Delver looking-glass.

There was nothing there.

The room was reflected back to him faithfully, its dusty confines transmuted into glimmering infinity. A snatch of a half-remembered Tennyson poem occurred to him, and he muttered it aloud: " 'I am half-sick of shadows,' said the Lady of Shalott... ! "

And still he could not look away, and the breathing stillness held him. From around one corner of the mirror a moth-eaten buffalo head peered at him with flat obsidian eyes.

The boy had wanted a drink of water and the fountain was in the first-floor lobby. He had gone downstairs and --

And had never come back.

Ever.

Anywhere.

Like the duchess who had paused after primping before her glass for a *soiree* and decided to go back into the sitting room for her pearls. Like the rug-merchant who had gone for a carriage ride and had left behind him only an empty carriage and two closemouthed horses.

And the Delver glass had been in New York from 1897 until 1920, had been there when Judge Crater --

Carlin stared as if hypnotized into the shallow depths of the mirror. Below, the blind-eyed Adonis kept watch.

He waited for Spangler much like the Bates family must have waited for their son, much like the duchess's husband must have waited for his wife to return from the sitting room. He stared into the mirror and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

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